

Introduction

The irony of Afghanistan is reflected in the young lad with good command of English manning the 12 hour night shift at the reception desk of Tejarat International Hotel in Herat. He attends BA classes by day, sleeps in the afternoon, aims to further attain MA degree but says there are no jobs other than in the army where he has already served three years and a second tenure means more chance of getting killed. The state in rural areas can be gauged by the fact that there is 35 per cent unemployment and narcotics contribute to 50 per cent of agricultural produce. The paradox of this condition is that the country has untapped mineral reserves to the tune of US \$ 3 trillion as per Afghan sources, 3.8 billion barrels of oil between Balkh and Jarwan in the North, estimated mean volume of undiscovered petroleum of 1,596 million barrels of crude oil, 444 billion cubic metres of natural gas, and 562 million barrels of natural gas liquids.

History of Violence

Afghanistan has had a history of violence for past several decades. In more recent times, the Soviet occupation widened the divide between the Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns. It also led to the rise of the Mujahedeen in Pakistan with the US and Chinese support, and within Afghanistan rise of the Afghan Taliban and Al Qaeda with US support to oust the Soviets, major fear being Soviets would advance South and lodge in proximity of the Persian Gulf, so critical to American interests. Then came a decade of Taliban rule with full Pakistani support. This was followed by the US invasion of October 2001. Pakistan became the frontline ally of the US in global war on terrorism (GWOT) but only after the US permitted a Division worth of Pakistanis (26,000 plus) including 9000 Pakistan Taliban (3,000 Pashtuns and 6,000 Punjabis) evacuated out of Kunduz and Khost, many were airlifted. The US was also aware that Pakistan had airlifted hundreds of Afghan Taliban out of these locations as investment for future proxy war. The stay of the US-NATO since 2001 did little to bring up the economy of impoverished Afghanistan still dependent on 97 per cent foreign aid.

Ground Situation

Afghanistan's strategic location has become a disadvantage with the Country caught amidst the Great Game; geopolitical power play between the US, China and Russia, with Pakistan walking the tight rope appeasing the former two. About 60 per cent of Afghanistan has gone under Taliban control. The lightning capture of large parts of Kunduz on 28 Sep by Taliban surprised the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), while attention was focused on the southern and eastern strongholds of Taliban.¹ But both the Afghan and Pakistan Taliban had been moving purposefully to northern Afghanistan, latter pushed into Afghanistan by Pakistani military offensive Operation 'Zarb-e-Azb'.² Both the Taliban had always been linked. This bond was sealed further by Pakistan establishing Mullah Akhtar Mansoor as the head of Afghan Taliban.³ Mullah Mansoor is the religious leader of Haqqanis based in Pakistan for the last 30 years. So now Pakistan has both the Taliban and Haqqanis to wage her proxy war in Afghanistan.⁴ Pakistan's Operation 'Zarb-e-Azb' has also pushed lakhs of refugees into Afghanistan, facilitating infiltrating terrorists as part of the 20 Mujahid battalions that Pakistan had trained to operate as Taliban during 2012-2013.⁵ Pakistani regulars have been involved in terrorist attacks even in Kabul.⁶ What led to the bombing of the 'Doctors Without Borders' hospital in Kunduz by US forces on 03 Oct was USSF intelligence that the facility was a Taliban command and control centre, a Pakistani ISI operative present was coordinating operations and possibly a store house of heavy weapons.

The Taliban have invested Kunduz, captured Warduj district east of Kunduz, and Ghormach district of Faryab province having consolidated in Badakshan region of northern Afghanistan, far beyond their usual southern strongholds, fully backed by Pakistan. This has led to Russia increasing her troop strength in Tajikistan under a security agreement between both countries. Violence pan Afghanistan has increased and Taliban influence is likely to increase.⁷ The ISIS has consolidated in seven districts of Nangarhar province and is already attacking the ANSF. Their sanctuaries in Pakistan obviously also getting cadres from Uighurs of China, East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and possibly even from Maldives, India and Bangladesh. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan has already declared they are "part" of ISIS and hundreds of youth from Central Asia are joining ISIS. Al Qaeda has declared full support to Afghan Taliban while most Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have declared allegiance to the ISIS.⁸ Overall, the situation is grim and because of lack of governance views are being expressed that the Afghan Government would find it difficult to survive even in the mid-term.

Security Cover

There are currently 9,800 US troops in Afghanistan, most of which were due to leave by the end of 2016, save for an embassy security force in Kabul. But post the Taliban success in Kunduz, that number will now remain constant before falling to about 5,500 troops in early 2017. The forces who remain will continue training and advising Afghan troops, while a special operations contingent will focus on counterterrorism. A small number of US bases are likely to continue, including at Bagram, Jalalabad in the East, and Kandahar in the South. However, this does not mean much because the transition of security duties from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to the ANSF in 2014 was premature and without Afghanistan even achieving adequate political stability; with a Pentagon report highlighting in 2014 itself that the Afghan National Army (ANA) was short of air, artillery, logistics support and even transport. This explains how the Taliban could easily capture major part of Kunduz. ANA is fighting with what it has; but, with voids even in transport, it has problems in providing logistics support to troops deployed in far flung areas. The contractual period of an ANA soldier is only three years; and plans to extend it to 10 years cannot be implemented because finances to maintain the force are promised only up to 2017. Despite 35 per cent unemployment, there are large scale desertions.⁹ In 2014, 203,888 small arms could not be accounted for - possibly sold off.¹⁰ By February 2015, ANA had declined to an overall strength of 1,69,203 personnel (lowest ever since 2011) and attrition continues to be a problem.

ANA's manpower strength has reportedly further declined to around 1,40,000. This strength is grossly inadequate to fight some 25,000 Taliban and large cities can easily be infiltrated despite ANA presence; Kunduz had 7000 ANA troops when Taliban captured large parts of it. It could be recaptured only after a week of fighting with coalition support. Eventual pullout of US-NATO troops and closure of Operation 'Resolute Support' will create further massive voids.

Security versus Economy

The Centre for Strategic and International Studies, the US had reported in 2012 that if all figures from financial year (FY) 2001-2013 are totalled for the direct spending on the US war in Afghanistan, they reach US \$641.7 billion, of which US \$198.2 billion (30 per cent) was to be spent in FY 2012 and FY 2013.¹¹ More importantly, the vast majority of aid went to the ANSF, not development. The report also stated that this data was only about the amount of money made available on category basis and did not indicate how much money actually reached Afghanistan. The point to note is that nothing was done to improve the economy. The fundamental problem remains that the US continues to rush ANSF to accept responsibility for the security based on Obama's timetable rather than conditions on the ground. Announcement of extended stay of US troops in Afghanistan may give political mileage to Obama, but means little considering the deteriorating situation. General John Campbell has stated that the President's decision (extended stay of US troops) "serves notice to our common enemies It is time for them to lay down their arms and enter the political process." But given the Taliban gains, it will make no difference, Mullah Akhtar Mansoor having already stated he is not interested in any talks.

Some queries have been raised about how roughly 25,000 Taliban fighters are giving so much trouble to 352,000 ANSF and nearly 17,000 coalition forces, little realising ANA is down to around 1,40,000 and coalition forces are not all tasked for combat support. The Afghan War is being termed as America's longest war but nothing was done to uplift Afghan economy. In sharp contrast, America's 60-year troop presence that contributed to South Korea's transition from a country devastated by war to one of Asia's most affluent economies is a case in point. Point to note, this success was made possible in part by a long term military commitment that was not constrained by the lifespan of a single presidential administration of the US. Even today, some 28,500 American soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines are stationed in South Korea, of course as forward presence as part of US rebalancing toward Asia-Pacific.

If the last six years have proved anything, it is that the Taliban are more resilient than analysts give them credit for. Even a veneer analysis of the circumstances suggests that American troops need not be in the lead, but they must remain in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future unless the aim is to plunge the region into chaos to stymie Russian and Chinese influence. Simultaneously, the ANSF needs to be realistically boosted not numerically alone but by providing the required wherewithal to eventually take on the security of Afghanistan without external support in the long-term. In the absence of such a plan, Afghanistan is headed for greater instability, with Central Asia equally threatened and Russia may need to support the Afghan Government in critical situations, as it is doing in Syria.

Rebuilding Afghanistan

As would be clear from the aforesaid, security is a must for the economy to come up. Much of Afghanistan's security issues can be addressed if economic sanctions are placed on Pakistan, till it stops her proxy war and support to Taliban. The US needs to seriously revisit her Pakistan policy, including targeting the terrorist sanctuaries inside Pakistan akin to Russia tackling the ISIS in Syria. Pressure also needs to be put on Pakistan by global forums including the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and Collective Security Treaty Organisation; latter, because of the threat to Central Asia. Also a coherent economic and industrial policy is needed where suggestions and guidance to the Unity Government should actually be welcomed by the latter. The Taliban would certainly not lay down arms; but, enlargement of their recruitment base to include non-Pashtuns should make them conducive to permit activities that uplift Afghanistan's economy.

Looking at the mineral wealth of Afghanistan, areas in the North, East and South under Taliban control have large reserves, whose tapping should not be attempted crudely. The worst example is that of copper mines where unscrupulous exploitation and lack of oversight can become a source of environmental disaster of catastrophic proportions. The High Peace Council which also has Taliban representation could contribute to such an economically progressive plan, even as the Taliban do not believe in democracy and don't respect the Afghan Constitution. Extraction of minerals will also need transportation, railways etc and industrialisation, all leading to much needed jobs.

The 2009 US announcement of pull-out resulted in investors and NGOs abandoning Afghanistan. The international community made little progress on the seven Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) (Counter Terrorism, Counter Narcotics, Disaster Management, Chambers of Commerce, Commercial Opportunities, Regional Infrastructure and Education) agreed upon in the June 2012 Kabul Ministerial Meeting held at Kabul, attended by 20 countries in addition to the EU and the UAE. Even then all countries represented had not committed to support all the CBMs; China committing to only three. Any project that contributes to upgrading the economy automatically contributes to peace building. The Indian-built Salma Dam was recently renamed India-Afghanistan Friendship Dam. Many other projects are being undertaken by India, as also other countries. China is in the process of extracting minerals and has been drilling commercial oil since 2012; is doing electricity generation for mining and has undertaken railroad projects that provide jobs for Afghan population.

But these are individual countries, not as per an overall development plan. A major scope exists in the agricultural sector including shift from narcotics cultivation to cash crops. Significantly, Mullah Omar had declared poppy cultivation un-Islamic in year 2000 and did not permit narcotics cultivation, so it is not that Afghanistan cannot survive without poppy. With all the advances, perhaps even a strain of locust could be introduced that wipes out poppy cultivation. A focused approach to energise the agricultural sector should be undertaken supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), where even joint projects could be taken on by India and China.

As per the ADB, economic activity remained slow in the first half of 2015 in Afghanistan.¹² Investor and consumer confidence was low as the political and security situation worsened and the National Unity Government struggled to deliver on anticipated reforms. Agricultural production in 2015 is projected to be slightly higher than in 2014, based on initial estimates, with good harvests of wheat, fruits and vegetables. Construction, trade and services remained depressed. Foreign direct investment declined by 30 per cent in the first half of the year. Business conditions deteriorated substantially from January to June 2015. The Afghan Afghani (AFN) currency depreciated by 5.7 per cent against the dollar from January to June 2015, continuing a declining trend since 2011. Declining capital inflow, rising capital outflow, and flagging demand for AFN during the period amounted to downward pressure on the currency from weakening political and security situations.¹³ The World Bank forecasts an unfavourable medium-term outlook: growth, projected at 1.9 per cent, would likely remain sluggish in light of further deterioration in security; mild recovery is expected for 2016; real GDP growth is projected to increase to 3.1 and 3.9 per cent in 2016 and 2017 respectively, and; improvements in the security environment and strong reform momentum could help restore confidence in the economy.

The potential Afghan private sector has not been optimised as an engine of economic growth or an instrument of social inclusion. To break the deadlock, bold economic reforms and new government partnership modalities with the private sector and the international community are needed.¹⁴ A recent Stockholm International Peace Research Institute report offers a review of the Afghan private sector and concrete recommendations on how to facilitate a more inclusive, productive and competitive private sector. Recommendations for the Afghan Government include: providing direction for growth of private sector; increase the capacity of state economic institutions that support the private sector; tailored measures to curb corruption; improve business climate; update trade policy and digitise custom procedures; mobilise state landholdings for use by private sector; invest in infrastructure critical to economic activity, and; ensure equal participation by women.

Recommendations to the international community include: support Afghan Government including direct but careful market intervention; set up formal cooperation and coordination mechanism for development of private sector conjointly; establish formal international aid database; support full value-chain development projects in the agricultural sector, which have high labour intensity and job creation potential, including for women; aid interventions should aim to target communities based on need rather than on political or security priorities; and; incorporate consumer demand perspectives. India should play a lead role in assisting Afghanistan in coordinating such activities since for both the CBMs of 'Chambers of Commerce' and 'Commercial Opportunities' agreed to at the June 2012 Kabul Ministerial Meeting, India was allotted the lead role. The bottom-line is that the world needs to give more attention to Afghanistan before the situation in this region deteriorates like Iraq and Syria.

Endnotes

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